

## Outstanding English Courses and Teachers from a Student's Perspective

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### **Abstract**

Encouraged by Allwright's conception of Exploratory Practice, the author took advantage of a routine e-mail assignment to gather comments from over 140 Japanese university English majors on their language learning experiences and the teachers and courses they had found particularly valuable or inspiring. Student messages exemplifying common themes are offered here along with comments by the author. Themes discussed include... the primacy of junior and senior high school language learning experiences; teachers sharing their stories and experiences; language as a means of communication and route to knowledge; activities which engage the heart and mind and explore substantive topics; comprehensible English for learning and enjoyment; the challenge and rewards of rigorous language study; human connection and class atmosphere; and study abroad and homestay. Gathering and discussing student comments yielded benefits in the forms of greater understanding of students' language learning experiences and values, enhanced class atmosphere and positive long-term effects on teaching practice.

### **Introduction : Exploratory Practice**

At the JALT99 (Japan Association for Language Teaching) conference, Dick Allwright (1999a), in his talk on Exploratory Practice, related his experience teaching a course on classroom research with overworked, underpaid teachers in Brazil. He found that many did not have the time, support or background to follow common models for action research, but that some were already profitably investigating the puzzles they encountered—largely through existing classroom activities, and in ways that involved students in the exploration process (Allwright, 2003). From these beginnings, Allwright developed his conception of Exploratory Practice:

Exploratory Practice offers a new way of working in the language classroom, a way that can enable both teachers and learners to develop their understanding of what happens in their language lessons, while getting on with the language learning itself. It basically involves using standard language learning activities, but adapting them to focus attention on something about classroom language learning that is puzzling people.

(Allwright, 1999b, 123)

... Exploratory Practice is founded on two basic principles: (a) The main aim is understanding, rather than problem solving, principally, but not exclusively, because intelligent problem-solving surely depends upon an adequate prior understanding of the problem to be solved; and (b) Any work for understanding must not get in the way, but must instead be a productive part of the pedagogy, for learners as well as for teachers.

(Allwright, 1999c, 6)

This concept resonated with me, and I began thinking about how I could glean more from my students in the course of the learning activities we pursue together.

One area that I am curious about are my students' expectations *for* and reactions *to* their language learning experiences. What types of classes and learning activities interest them? What do they see as useful? How do their perceptions of a class differ from mine? What positive and negative language learning experiences do they bring to my course?

### **Exploring student attitudes and experiences: E-mail assignment**

While teaching first through fourth year English majors at Tohoku Gakuin University, Sendai, Japan in 1999, I had an opportunity to pursue some of these questions. To facilitate communication in each of my classes, all students were asked to set up browser-based e-mail accounts and contact me with an initial message. What should be the content of the message? Considering this, I recalled Allwright's talk and saw a chance to gain some understanding, so I asked students to include a paragraph (at least four sentences) on one of four topics:

- A. Why did you decide to major in English? Do you have any specific English learning goal? Do you plan to use English in the future? How?
- B. Tell me about the best, most interesting, or most helpful language class you've ever had (junior high school, senior high school, or university). Why was it such a good class? How did it help you? How was it different than other classes that weren't so helpful?

- C. How do you feel about this class, so far? What are some positive or negative points? What could the teacher do to improve the class? What could the students do to improve the class?
- D. Tell me about something you've been thinking or reading about recently. It could be about events in Japan or the world, or a situation in your own life.

I encouraged students to choose topics A, B or C, and was happy to find that over half of the 280 learners wrote on topic B, or a combination of A and B. These are the focus of this article. The length and quality of responses exceeded expectations, and it was fascinating to read the students' revealing comments on their learning experiences, what they valued in a class or teacher and what got them excited about English. Going through the e-mails, I noted major themes, and in this article present several sets of student responses, grouped by theme, along with comments on what these meant to me as a teacher. I hope the students' voices are as instructive for the reader as they have been for me. (Beyond correction of some punctuation to ease reading, student messages are unedited).

### Limitations

Before proceeding with student responses and discussion of these, two limitations of this study should be mentioned:

The "results" discussed here are exploratory and anecdotal in nature. Responding to open-ended questions, students produced a great variety of responses that did not lend themselves to neat classification. Most of the messages below exemplify common themes, but there is no attempt to statistically rank responses or justify selection of these examples. Unique, or uniquely expressed, messages are also enlightening for the different lines of thinking they reveal, and for the fact that at least one learner had such a thought or experience.

Another "limitation" is that most respondents, being English majors, had, at least to some degree, "caught the English bug." There are no comments from students who never "liked" English, and thus no information on how *they* responded to *their* English learning experiences or what kinds of classes they might have appreciated. In a related vein, questions and responses focused on what students found stimulating and useful. Beyond a few hints, there was little indication of what students found unhelpful or de-motivating. I am currently surveying non-English majors at Tohoku Fukushi University to discover more about their

experiences and attitudes in relation to English learning.

### Student responses—grouped by theme, with comments

#### 1. Junior and senior high school experiences

- *My junior high school English teacher . . .*
- *In my first year of high school . . .*
- *When I was in junior high school, . . .*
- *. . . enjoyed my high school grammar teacher . . .*

#### Comments

Few students (regardless of year in school) mentioned university courses, with the great majority writing about junior and senior high school classes and teachers. The clear message was that in regards to developing motivation and making a connection between language and life goals, *junior and senior high school* is where it happens. For most English majors, the die has been cast by the time they get to college. As their university instructor, I can offer opportunities for learning and possibly help students discover new possibilities/potentials, but I am unlikely to have the same kind of influence that a junior or senior high school instructor can.

#### 2. Inspiring teachers and their classes

- *My best English class was in my 3rd year of high school. It was an English oral communication class. Ms. S (Japanese) and Ms. F from Ireland taught us a lot of things. Ms. F told us about Irish culture, history, religions, foods, music and so on. It made me feel like going to Ireland. She speaks French, Italian, Irish as well as English. I thought I should follow her example.*  
*Ms. S is very active woman to go to Britain by herself with a backpack only. I admire her lifestyle. There were about 25 students in this class. We talked to each other and made speech in front of them. Doing this enabled me to speak in public and make more friends. I will make good use of this experience not only studying English but also every thing.*
- *My most interesting English class was in my first and second year of junior high school. It was delightful because the teacher (Japanese) taught us grammar, but also taught us interesting games and homeworks with English. For example, we played “karuta” in English, imagine game, recorded each voice in the tape and made an English textbook one*



*by one. At the same time, I got many chances to speak English in his classes. And ~~he~~ was interested in Asia's countries, so he showed many souvenir to us. (He has been to Indonesia since 1996.) We were always looking forward to his coming our classroom. As a result, I was interesting to learn English and I wanted to understand English than before because of him.*

- *My best English class was in my second and third year of junior high school. I was learned by the same teacer for that two years. She was Japanese and very fearful teacer. She taught us grammar and how to speak, write and use English. We discussed with friends, wrote English letters and exchanged them with friends and other school year's people, expressed our reports in English, and so on. We almost spoke English in a class. She gave us to use and make English. She talked us her own experiences in foreign country and show us many pictures and films of that. She taught us many things except a text. Thanks to this English class, I came to be pleasantly and interested in English. This class was the base of English for me, and it was an opportunity to go to a university and study English.*
- *I want to be a E-teacher. This is my dream. I decided to be a E-teacher when I was a junior high school student. Because my E-teacher [Mr.] Y. (Japanese) is a good teacher. He is good at teaching grammer, speak and write. I thought I want to become like him. Since I am study.*

#### Comments :

These messages illustrate several themes that arose repeatedly :

These instructors, whether Japanese or foreign, recognized communication as the purpose of language (Crookall & Oxford, 1990). They not only taught students about language, but allowed language to fulfill its communicative purpose in the classroom through authentic (Widdowson, 1979), creative exchange, including learning about each other and about the world. This involved not only oral communication, but actual, written communication, as well—an aspect too often missing when instructors are the only audience for student writing (Kelly, 2001 ; Wachs, 1993).

Students often singled out Japanese instructors who had pursued life-enriching experiences, and had, in turn, shared these with their pupils. Many students mentioned the inspiration this provided: "He did it. Maybe I could, too." Non-native teachers have a real advantage here (Lee, 2000 ; Maum, 2002). However, Ms. F, the ALT instructor from Ireland, was also an inspiration through her enthusiastic sharing of her own culture and

language, and beyond that, through her excitement for other languages and cultures.

Wright (2003) would likely add that these instructors told stories. Students may not respond with obvious enthusiasm, but interesting stories about life and experience can yield many benefits. Teaching a class at a girl's high school in Sendai, I resolved one year to tell a brief true story each week, usually related to the lesson theme. Although I rarely perceived more than lukewarm interest (other activities seemed far more "successful"), a year-end questionnaire revealed that students felt these same stories were far and away the most useful things we had done that year—for listening practice, cultural information, and making associated activities more meaningful.

### 3. Engaging the heart and mind

- *My best English class was in my 2nd year of junior high school. It helped me because our teacher taught us a English song. It was "Yesterday" of the Beatles. Before he taught this song I was very shy to speak English but after he taught, I could speak boldly. Our teacher taught us how to pronounce by using this song. I think this is the first time that I was interested in English and English song. I think it's not important only Grammar for a beginner of English. To interest was helpful to study English so I think this class was really successful.*
- *My best language class is my 3rd year high school English conversation class. My teacher was Ausutlarian. she taught me many things. I like English argument. Theme were environment, helth, political and so on. It was so helpful to listen opinion of my freinds and teacher. It was goot chanse to think deeply about many problems. The reason I liked the class was to face many problems.*

### Comments

As also seen in the previous set of examples, interest is central in these classes. Teachers strove to offer opportunities that would engage the intellect and show respect for students as thinking members of society, even if they were sometimes unable to express themselves clearly in the target language. The first student's point, that grammar is not the only important thing for beginners, deserves consideration. Learners need some kind of language learning payoff now, not a year down the line. The payoff may be intellectual stimulation, learning a song you like, developing friendships, picking up new information, enjoying stories—anything students value that they can access through this new language. A continuing challenge for teachers is how to facilitate this in the classroom (Brumfit, 1985 ;

Richard-Amato, 1988).

These instructors found ways into the topics, tasks, or skills they were targeting. Beatles songs became an engaging context for a pronunciation lesson involving the mind *and* heart. Developing class discussions, the second teacher was obviously able to approach these topics in ways that helped students engage with them successfully. A clear message from this student is, "Don't be scared away by serious topics!" Rather than finding "easy" topics, the key to successful engagement and interaction is often the path into a topic (Bassano & Christison, 1987).

Another related point is that serious faces do not mean *unengaged minds*. I like to see students obviously interested and enjoying themselves. But worthwhile topics do not always induce smiles or floods of chatter. A challenge for me is to more accurately monitor student engagement, depending on the type of work we are doing at the time.

#### 4. Comprehensible English for learning and enjoyment

- *My best English class was in my 3rd year of high school. It was "Reading". The teacher had lived foreign country before he became a English teacher. He told us about this culture, his funny experiences. And his pronunciation was better than other teachers'. So we enjoyed it. In the class, we read many stories which was longer than stories we read in other English classes. And they were easier and more interesting. We practiced understanding the content, not study English grammar. Thanks to it, I enjoy the homework, reading English books now. Other classes of my 3rd year of high school were for the entrance examination. But it was not. I could study it willingly. Because it helps me now, it is my best English class.*

#### Comments

One of several factors that stand out here is the instructor's use of longer, easier stories for reading class. With accessible (level-appropriate), interesting materials, students went beyond the *study* of English to interact with content/ideas *through* English. Students felt successful and experienced the *payoffs/rewards* of learning, as mentioned in Section 3.

What if there is no choice of reading materials? Izumi (1995), teaching in a Japanese high school, had to use a prescribed textbook beyond the competence of his students. Rather than employing the common procedure of having students translate the readings, he supplied translations for them to read first. With this support, the readings became much more comprehensible. Students could then participate in discussions or get on with meaning-

focused homework while referring only to the English versions.

This is not an argument against intensive study of relatively difficult material, but it does point to the need for extensive exposure to interesting, easily comprehensible content and the benefits this can bring (Day & Bamford, 1998; Waring & Brown, 2003; Waring, 2006). This particular student's experience in high school made it easy for him to appreciate the extensive reading program in my university course.

### 5. The *study* of language

- *My best English class was my first year of junior high school. Then, for the first time in my life I studied English. The class was helpful because our teacher taught us grammar, it was easy for us to understand grammar. And sometimes the teacher taught us English song. Thanks to the teacher, I learned some English songs. "Last Christmas" is one of my favorite songs. And he often showed us movie in English, almost all of the students were looking forward to seeing movie. So we enjoyed studying English. I think that I was interested in English by this class. This class was very interesting for me.*
- *My best English class was in my second year of high school. It was the grammar class. The teacher was very kind. And he taught us English grammar plainly. I had not studied the grammar very much until I met him. But, since I could understand the grammar because of him, I studied hard.*
- *My best language class was my 1st and 2nd junior high school English class. It was helpful because the teacher spoke and taught us in English, except to explain English grammar. We had studied English under this teacher and we had become tolerably proficient in hearing English. Also, he did the words test every classes. So, we could learn a lot of words. Thanks to his class, I could become liking for English and passed an examination which is the Ministry of education encourage.*
- *My best English class were in my second and third year of high school. It was difficult for me to understand but it was very fun. At that class I use Mainichi weekly or some other newspaper. It was written by English. It was hard for me to read but if I can read it I was very happy. This class give me a lot of things. For example if I read the newspaper I found a lot of new words which I don't know. So I knew a lot of new words. Others are grammar. Newspaper is write by some difficult grammar. It was so difficult but if I passed a lot of class I understood. I felt happy. This class was very interesting for me. I want to learn more.*



### Comments

One occasionally hears that students are not interested by in-depth study of grammar, usage, etc. These students would not have agreed. Numerous students mentioned how they thrived on studying grammar and vocabulary and wrestling with difficult texts (especially if they could see some immediate or near term application). It was a fun puzzle—a challenge! Not every student feels this way, of course, but *none* of the respondents said they were attracted to English because it was their *easiest* subject. Some, in fact, felt quite the opposite, commenting that the challenge of a rigorous English course helped them develop and learn, and this was a tremendous source of satisfaction.

### 6. Human connection

- *When I was junior high school student, on The New Year's Day, I checked a New Year's (greeting) card. To my surprise, I found the card my school ALT sent me. I was not so familiar to her. I knew only by face. And this was the first time I got the English letter cards. After the winter vacation, I thanked her for her card by my poor English. But she said "You're the first person to thank me for my card". After this matter, we spoke to in a friendly way—for example when I pass her in the hallway, we went out together on Sunday, etc. A pleasant time passed quickly. The time came she returned U.S. for her wedding. When the fare well party held, she said good-bye to me, also said had a good time with me. I promised to write a letter frequently, also I promised to visit new family someday. So, I'd like to know more about English because of these reason. Throughout exchanging many letters between me and her in my high school days, The culture of English was very attractive for me, -life style, food, building, music, fashion, environmental problem... etc. I believed that learning English is a means of knowing the culture, people, and also her. So, I decided to major in English in university.*
- *My best English class was from my 1st year to 3rd year of junior high school. Because it was very kind and understandable for me to study English for the first time. My English teacher, Mrs. K. (Japanese), was a nice teacher. Because of her, I could learn English harder than any other student. And she was a homeroom teacher. She was so kind to every student that I could ask many many questions. Harder and harder I studied English, more and more I wanted to know about kinds of languages.*

### Comments

These teachers were approachable and open to human connection with their students. A

number of students mentioned how they were inspired by instructors who affirmed their worth and gave them the courage/confidence to pursue knowledge and opportunities for learning and growth—teachers with the “heart, soul, energy, and a special effervescence that allowed them to ‘reach kids.’” (Intrator, 2002, 2).

As a teacher, I sometimes struggle with the balance between *openness* and *safety*. If I am open to touch students’ lives in a positive way and be touched by them, I may also be vulnerable to hurt and discouragement. Each teacher has to chart his/her own course regarding this issue, but it is encouraging to know that some students fully appreciate the ways their teachers have reached out to them.

## 7. Class atmosphere

- *My best interesting English class was in 3rd years of high school. It was oral communication class. Teacher is Irish woman. She did not teach us English grammar, but also speaking English. And she always told us about foreign country’s culture and custom. It is very interesting. She was very friendly, gentle. So I enjoyed English class. And there other reason that I love this class. All student in this class was very friendly and funny. And they were interested in foreign country and me too. So we enjoyed speaking many foreign story. I also learned how to come in contact foreign people. And I hope that I want to use the way that I learned in this class, when I go abroad.*

## Comments

This note echoes points mentioned in several other sections. Especially impressive, is the atmosphere of warmth and mutual interest that developed and its contribution to the success of this class. Teachers cannot single-handedly command or create this atmosphere, but can facilitate its development (Moskowitz, 1978; Mutch, 1995; Omaggio-Hadley, 1993), as this instructor obviously did.

## 8. Study abroad and homestay

- *When I was in eleventh grade, I could get a chance, going to study English in Seattle. I learned not only English conversation but American culture, history, and people. It made me change a lot. It greatly widened my horizons. So I thought that I should study all of information, including the language, English . . .*
- *The best class was English . . . My English teacher was in charge of my class. He taught me English conversation. It was useful to me for my school trip. When I was in my 2nd year*

*of senior high school, I went to Korea. I have a friendship with Korean students. I was speaking Korean a little. But I've almost spoken English. So, English was useful to me. I felt a joy that when it was useful. That English class was very good class because it gave me a dream. It's been my dream to be a English teacher.*

- *When I was 17 years old, I went the U.S.A. It was a school program. About half of my class joined it. We stayed with hostfamily. There were only 2 people in my family : my hostmother and hostsister. Then I couldn't communicate well. So I decided that I study English harder and I want to be able to speak English. And I want to visit my hostfamily.*

### Comments

Experiences studying and living abroad bring plentiful exposure to language with immediate opportunity and need for real-world application. They also bring daily, hour-by-hour culture lessons. Learners rethink their identities and expand their worlds. They see their accomplishments, their shortcomings, and the potential benefits of progress. These points may be obvious to teachers who continually exhort students to get this kind of experience, but it is gratifying to see learners forming these impressions on their own—that the experience is more than just sightseeing.

### 9. An impressive, integrated program

- *My best English class was all of classes in a senior high school. I belonged to the International course in this school, which was attached to importance to English to bring up the international view. All of my classmates loved English well, and it was very stimulative surroundings for me. I had two classes by native speakers of English—"English conversation class" & "Listening class". We used the TOEFL Practice Tests as a textbook in the Listening class. The speed of speaking was very fast, and its level was beyond me. Although the teacher of grammar was Japanese, she spoke only English and used only a regular handwriting. These things made me difficult to understand, but were stimulative. She also used an English newspaper as a textbook. The teacher of geography often told us stories about her travelling overseas. The teacher of Japanese history taught us how to explain our history to foreigners. In the homeroom, we always invited foreigners to exchange cultures each other. It was really wonderful time for me to see & experience the world. Every day was fullness and exciting and inspired me. I believed an importance of such a surroundings. These things helped me to enjoy studying English and to desire to improve myself.*

### Comments

The description of this exemplary, integrated program left me somewhat in awe. It is truly exciting to hear about the innovative, envelope-pushing work going on in some junior and senior high schools. Responses from this student and others also serve as a caution against the smug assumptions sometimes made at the university level about the state of secondary language education in Japan. Instead, I have to recognize the possibility that, for some students, my university course represents a step down from higher standards experienced in high school.

### Summary

What started as a logistical step in establishing online communication, became, in the context of Exploratory Practice, an opportunity to gain useful insight into my students' learning experiences and what they had found particularly valuable, memorable and/or inspiring.

Several impressions stand out :

- Language learning experiences in junior and senior high school can have a critical impact on attitudes toward language, culture and the wider world—potentially playing a significant role in students' sense of identity and future direction. Language teachers at secondary schools can take heart that while student response to learning opportunities may be mixed, some do respond with significant and lasting positive effect.
- Many students were inspired by teachers (Japanese and foreign) who pursued life-enriching experiences, developed wide-ranging knowledge and shared these with their students. This sharing seemed especially powerful as part of a class context/culture in which English frequently fulfilled its purpose as a means of authentic communication (both written and oral) and route to learning about each other and about the world. In this light, teachers may want to consider the role that their own interests, experiences and stories could play in class, and to what degree the target language is serving as a route to communication and knowledge rather than as an end in itself.
- In a related vein, numerous students responded to activities which engaged their hearts and intellects, offering a language learning payoff now, rather than a year (or six) down the road. Skilled teachers found ways to provide comprehensible, personally meaningful input, imbue even "simple" classroom activities (pronunciation practice) with emotional



impact and successfully engage with “serious” topics.

- *Easy* does not equal *good*. No student reported being inspired because English class was easy, but a number mentioned the challenge of rigorous study and rewards of success as important in their own development.
- Students appreciated teachers who respected and affirmed them as thinking, feeling individuals worthy of being heard and dealt with on a genuine human level. The vulnerability this entails can be threatening, but it can pay great dividends in personal growth and relationship, and in the positive class atmosphere it can facilitate.
- A number of students identified homestay/study abroad experiences as turning points in opening their eyes to language as a door to the world.
- Students come to university with varying experiences in language learning, some of which may surpass in rigor and quality courses they are taking in college. University instructors are well-advised to stay alert to developments in secondary language education and seek to take their students' experiences into account in providing appropriate learning opportunities.

## Conclusion

Although the results of this kind of open-ended inquiry are difficult to quantify or generalize, the exercise increased my understanding of my students' language learning backgrounds and the kinds of teachers, courses and experiences they valued. I also gained a greater appreciation of them as self-aware individuals with evolving attitudes and beliefs about language learning, and its place in their lives. This is useful information for any teacher as s/he attempts to provide and/or promote appropriate learning opportunities.

In my case, I was particularly encouraged to be freer in sharing my own experiences and stories with students and to increasingly explore ways to facilitate successful engagement with substantive topics. Both have yielded real benefits. Gaining the information as a part of normal coursework also made the inquiry more practical in terms of time and effort (for both instructor and students), and I believe that seeking student input and later discussing the results affirmed students as important contributors with valuable things to say, further adding to the atmosphere of mutual respect and endeavour in our classes.

I continue looking for opportunities to apply Exploratory Practice in answering questions about learners and the learning activities and contexts we are involved in. I am

currently surveying non-English majors at Tohoku Fukushi University to discover more about their experiences and attitudes in relation to English learning at secondary and tertiary levels. Beyond that, I hope this account is useful to others in identifying possible avenues of investigation with their own students.

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